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ABSTRACT

As the 21st century begins, the clicking of computer keyboards is increasingly interrupting the calm of literary classrooms. The sound of new technology now marks the world in which students grow up and will live, how they learn, and in essence who they are. How do educators cope and make it all work? On a typical day this could happen: the department chair determines there is not enough money in the budget for a needed software program; the computer staff cuts off the campus mail server without telling you, the instructor; and your students complain that others in class are more, or less, computer literate than they are. The following are some ways to negotiate through these kinds of situations: first--form political alliances with your colleagues, administrators, the computer staff, and your students; and second--demonstrate your program's "productivity." Teaching technical writing is a continuous, and often frustrating, learning process. Despite its downsides, though, the technical writing teacher must be willing to "embrace" technology to be successful. (NKA)

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The Politics of Technology and English Departments:

The Machine in the Language Community

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As a quick introduction, I should say that I started and built the undergraduate minor in Technical and Professional Writing at Texas A&M-Corpus Christi, and currently, I am the Director of the new M.A. with a major in Technical Communication at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos; our campus is located about 30 miles south of Austin and 40 miles north of San Antonio, in the heart of a rapidly developing high-tech corridor.

Some of you may have recognized the title of my presentation ["The Politics of Technology and English Departments: The Machine in the Language Community"] as a play on words from the landmark study, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, by Leo Marx. In his study, Marx depicts Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1844, sitting in the woods near Concord, MA, when the faint whistle of a locomotive begins in the distance, and becomes louder and louder, as it pierces the serenity and tranquility. That sound, contents Marx, is the metaphor signaling the change technology would make on American literary history, culture, and society forever.

And so it is for us as we turn into the 21st century. The clicking of computer keyboards is increasingly interrupting the calm of our literary classrooms. The sound of new technology now marks the world in which our students grow up and will live, how they learn, and in essence who they are.

Yet, as articles in Kay Herr Gillespie's *The Impact of Technology on Faculty Development, Life, and Work*, point out, "In the traditional world of academia, technology has arrived less as the invited guest than the unwelcome stranger" (Gandolfo 26). And, colleges and universities are sending signals to faculty that they want them to do more with technology but without adequate money and resources to do so. At the same time, technology has quickened the pace of academic life and increased stress levels for faculty.

Nevertheless, we, here, are immersed in this new technological world. How do we cope and make it all work? I begin with a composite, yet not untypical day, when numerous things go wrong: your chair determines there's not enough money in the budget for a needed software program; the computer staff cuts off the campus mail server without telling you; and your students complain that others in class are either more, or less, computer literate than they are.

The following are some ways to negotiate through these kinds of situations.

First: Form Political Alliances

Build alliances with your colleagues

About the role of a WPA in a Technical Communication program, Sherry Burgus Little writes, "In many ways, the English Department is an uneasy home for technical communication programs, primarily because of the issue of what constitutes *education* and how it differs from *training* (28)."

Show your colleagues that you are an advocate for the Liberal Arts. Create an electronic newsletter to send to your colleagues, students, and campus friends about your program. I send mine to the directors of the Literature and MFA programs in the English

Department. I also keep a running list of all of our students who get jobs in technical communication, whether they are technical communication graduates or not. When notices about events in the Liberal Arts come across my desk, I circulate them in the e-newsletter, and I post flyers about them on my office door. These are ways to cross boundaries and create community.

Build alliances with administrators

One of the most important things you can do is find individuals on your campus who support your efforts in technology. Frequently, the introduction of technology is supported more by administrators than your colleagues. Find out who those administrators are, and build those alliances. Remember, though, that even the most supportive administrators may not understand the difficulties of teaching in a computer classroom, because they don't do it.

Sometimes when, you can't get what you need, go to the top. For example, once after waiting six weeks to get email, I phoned a vice president and left a message that I was meeting with the head of the campus Advancement Office, who would be out to promote my program to the high-tech industries, and it would look bad for the campus for the *Director of Technical Communication* not to have email. That afternoon someone from computer services showed up at my office door.

Find the "pockets" of money on your campus for you to tap. In the case of getting needed software, as I mentioned earlier, I found the person who had a discretionary fund of technology fees, and he purchased the software for me. Most campuses have fees attached to computers usage; consequently, if you have students using computers in your classes, you should have input into how those fees are used.

One person who has been very supportive of my program is the Dean of Liberal Arts. This fall, I asked her to spring for three lunches for a "Teaching Technology Lunch Bunch," a group of non-science faculty, who teach in computer classrooms, and computer staff to gather to just chat, a kind of informal campus learning community.

Among the topics we discussed were the lack of incentives for faculty to teach in computer classrooms, such as technical problems that appear on student evaluations as the teacher's fault, no awards for teaching in computer classrooms, and tenure and promotion committee members who don't understand the complexities of teaching in computer classrooms, because they don't do it.

With only three sessions, obviously, we didn't come up with definitive answers to these dilemmas, but what did come out of our Lunch Bunch was a sense that those of us who teach in computer classrooms are not out there, *alone*. And we developed a better understanding and appreciation about the different roles faculty and computer staff play in delivering instruction to students.

Build alliances with computer staff

Find out who on your campus can answer your computer questions, and it's seldom the computer hotline workers. Typically, computer staff are overworked, not really qualified to do their jobs because they are low-paid student workers, nor are they often "people" people. That is, they are not *communicative*. You should also know that just because someone has a degree in Computer Science does not mean he or she is knowledgeable about all aspects of computers. The person may know hardware or networking or programming but know nothing about software applications.

One thing you can do is offer to sit on campus technology committees, including screening committees for hiring the computer staff and/or you can suggest students you know who are technologically literate and "people" persons to apply for those positions.

As you form political alliances there, you can pinpoint a specific person who will let you know when the server will be down, as I mentioned earlier, or if other changes are being made. For instance, maybe someone on the computer staff has a spouse who has taught first-year writing or English courses and will sympathize with you in trying to teach writing and software programs at the same time. I once offered to help a network administrator complete his thesis if he taught me some system networking procedures.

Meanwhile, though, *always* have backup lesson plans. The operative word with computers is *should*—they *should* do this or *should* do that, when, in fact, they very well may *not* do what they are supposed to do *at all*.

Build alliances with your students

Today, almost every computer classroom will have students with varying technology savvy. To overcome their complaints about each other's technical literacy, as I mentioned earlier, you can balance the situation and ease their tensions by

- Having those who are most literate help others;
- Having students teach the class software they know;
- Setting a minimal standard for technical literacy that students need to know before they come to their first technical writing class;
- Modeling continuous learning by telling students *you* don't know everything and learning from them as well;

- Working with some of them on more sophisticated projects, like we are doing to update our webpage that was created before I was hired, and
- Letting students know that the frustrations and aggravations they (and you) experience now with technology will continue throughout their professional careers.

Second: Demonstrate Your Program's "Productivity"

Create and circulate an e-newsletter

One of the things academics don't do well is explain to others what we do. As I described earlier, create an e-newsletter to highlight news from the program and students. One of the most powerful things you can do for your students, your program, and your department is to show that English majors have more options than teaching in public schools.

Establish an Advisory Board

My advisory board not only advises me about developments in the high-tech world, they help my students network to get internships and jobs, and some members have even taught new software to my students, for free. Three of the members are graduates of the Literature program in our English Department. Advisory Board members also can rub elbows with people like the upper administration on your campus to get the word out about your program.

In Summary

To deal with the some of the problems and stresses that your new Professional/Technical Writing Program can create in a conventional English department, you should think "political"—that is, how to form alliances with your colleagues, administrators, and students. You should also find ways to promote your program's

successes such as newsletters and advisory boards. And finally, some advice on when to decide that you or your program isn't going "to work," no matter what you do:

If you are the type of person who needs to "master" something, like a body of work for an author, technical writing teaching isn't for you. No one *masters* technology. It is a continuous, and often frustrating, learning process. Despite its downsides, though, you must be willing to *embrace* technology to be successful.

Further, if you never get support from your administrators or colleagues, it's probably time to throw in the towel—tenure or not. Life's too short. With the job market as good as it is for expertise in technology and writing, you should be able to find an English Department that will support your job and be more suitable for a Professional/Technical Writing program.

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